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# GOETHE: ANTI-PRUSSIAN

BY EDITH FRANKLIN WYATT

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IN Chicago, in Lincoln Park, at the opposite end from the site of Saint Gaudens' great "Lincoln," we have a very large symbolic memorial of Goethe, one of our public monuments whose artistic excellence has been the subject of much controversy. Controversy has lately raged about the colossal statue anew, not indeed on the point of its artistic excellence, but concerning the ironic suggestion of a citizen that we inscribe about the base a saying attributed to Goethe, on a medal recently struck in England: "The Prussian is cruel by birth. Civilization will make him ferocious."

Where did Goethe say it? In Chicago, at least, searchers are still searching in vain through their Weimar editions, through the many, many works of an author who wrote all but daily for over sixty years; and who, when not writing, conversed with persons who seem to have rushed to commit to permanent keeping his every word, down to his most extended errors in botanical research.

But in that vast, amusing, and inspiring museum of Goethe's fame where we all have wandered, even a lay-reader will not ramble far without discovering that the greatest German did not like Prussia. The authoritative Bielschowsky shows us, beyond doubt, Goethe's various responses throughout his life to the plans and culture of the Northern kingdom. A child of the free imperial city of Frankfort, passing his early manhood in the ducal privilege and popular worship he received in the little court at Weimar, Goethe did not visit the Prussian capital, the largest city he had ever seen, till he was nearly thirty. He is charmed by Berlin's external splendor, but not by her court, which he attends with his patron Karl August, the Duke of Weimar, nor with that court's intrigues and sycophancies. "This much I can say," he observes of it with disaffection, "the greater the world, the nastier the farce."

When the Duke entered the Prussian army as a Major General, nearly ten years later, Goethe opposed his course. He accompanied his patron, and the Weimar military contingent, it is true, on their campaign with the Prussian army; marched with it against the French at Verdun, when the National Assembly of France declared war against Austria and thus against her ally Prussia in 1792, and exposed himself to ferocious cannon-fire in the Verdun attack; but it was not for the cause of Prussia, still less for the cause of a Germany united under Prussia, but characteristically "for the experience"!

In more senses than one, the last words of Goethe's existence when he died at eighty-three, "More light!" expressed his life passion. It is not too much to say that if the Prussian ways disgusted him at thirty, the intellectual darkness and monotony of the Prussian aims bored him and could not hold his attention at forty-three, even in one of their most sensational manifestations before Verdun.

At fifty-odd, Goethe's love of the light of the globe, his deep interest in world letters, was destined to receive a crushing blow from Prussia. The avatar of this passion was his beloved *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung*, published under the liberal auspices of the University of Jena. "This journal," says Bielschowsky, "which covered all specialties, and had hundreds of collaborators, enjoyed an extraordinary influence in the whole learned world, and Goethe spoke of it, not without justification, as world-famous."

Early in the nineteenth century, Prussia, alarmed undoubtedly by the French sympathies and radical tendencies of the great eclectic periodical, purchased it for what was then a fabulous price, and removed it to Halle, and to a future less eclectic. To-day, a hundred years afterwards, we can honor Goethe's nervous break-down at this Prussian conquest, and sympathize with what his biographers call his "abnormal irritability," for months after it, with everybody, even his dearest friends.

The conception of World Letters as a splendid free intercourse of all nations, the conception of culture as a garnering of all men's wisdom, the catholicism of the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* has remained antipathetic to the Prussian ideal. Such are the ironies of fame that the name of Goethe itself has been used in furtherance of the narrowness of Prussian propaganda. "Here is the fault of Professor Herr-

mann Grimm and of his Berlin lectures on Goethe," cried Matthew Arnold. "The Professor is a man with a system: the lectures are a piece of advocacy. Professor Grimm is not looking straight at 'the greatest poet of all times and of all peoples,' he is looking at the necessities as to literary glory of the new German empire."

"Kultur" connotes for all of us, to-day, simply the knowledge possessed by Prussians, and not by any means a German knowledge of all men's wisdom. The Prussian culture that bought the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* is the Prussian culture whose voice we heard reported only yesterday from the mouth of Herr von Dallwitz, the new Pan-German Governor of Alsace: "The Alsatians," he says, "are called by the geographic situation and their past history to form an *impassable rampart of culture and mentality purely German.*"

It is not only that Prussia discourages the multiple culture of the Internationalism of Goethe's admiration, she discourages the influence of any thought but Prussian thought; and Herr von Dallwitz refers to the Alsatians' memories of their French past as "extravagant and altogether grotesque fancies of a double culture." Among her citizens of international tradition, she discourages, it would appear, any speech, even the assertion that she desires their dumbness; and we learn that in an inspired paradox, and as though to prove the accuracy of her victim's assertion, she recently imprisoned for two weeks a barber in a Lorraine town, because he had said, "No one dare speak in our country."

It will be observed, however, that this spirit, the Prussia that stifled the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung*, did not succeed the other day in preventing the barber's words from reaching the world; and, a hundred years ago, it could not kill Goethe's activity on behalf of international interchanges of thought. An internationalist, Goethe was no anti-nationalist, no believer in the confounding or elimination of the clear varieties of national ideas. "The peculiarities of each nation," he says, "should be studied, so that we should be able to make allowances for them—nay, gain by their means real intercourse with a nation. For the special characteristics of a people are like its language and its currency: they facilitate exchange, nay, they first make exchange possible."

As Max Müller has told us, he watched the growth of

every literature—French, Italian, Spanish, Serbian, Bohemian, Lithuanian, Modern Greek, Swedish, Persian, and Arabic, and Sanskrit and Chinese.

His letters to Carlyle, his correspondence with Sir Walter Scott, his remarks on Coleridge's translation of *Wallenstein*, his interest, as in some hallowed rite, in Carlyle's entrance as an honorary member in the Berlin Society for Foreign Literature, a hundred appreciations of writers of English throughout Goethe's life, tell us that his feeling for cosmopolitan letters, for international sympathies, was one of the deepest emotions of his existence. His speech on the topic has the eloquence, has also the trepidation, of a lover. Not long before he was to die, in writing to Carlyle on the value of translation, he says: "Pardon me, my dear Sir, for these remarks, which perhaps are not quite coherent, not to be scanned all at once. They are drawn from the great ocean of observation, which as life passes on swells up more and more around every thinking person."

In all the museum of Goethe's fame, where there are so many exhibits of more importance, there are in my view no passages more distinguished than the episodes of his broad-minded intercourse, in his sixtieth year, with the French conquerors of Prussia and Weimar alike.

Throughout his life, the Prussians had either ignored Goethe or attacked his literary prestige. When *Götz von Berlichingen* first appeared in Berlin, Frederick II wrote: "*Voilà un Götz de Berlichingen qui paraît sur la scène. Imitation détestable de ces mauvaises pièces anglaises et le Parterre applaudit et demande avec enthousiasme la répétition de ces dégoûtantes platitudes.*"

The victorious French General Jentzel, investing Weimar, writes to the author of *Götz*: "Out of consideration for the great Goethe, the undersigned commandant of the city of Weimar will take every precaution to assure the safety of Herr Goethe and his house."

With great delicacy Jentzel selected, as the officer to be quartered with Goethe, a delightful French acquaintance of his, M. Denon, inspector-general of the arts of Paris; and the enforced guest, as a farewell gesture of grace to his admired enemy, on his departure from Weimar, had two medallions struck in honor of German literature, portraits of Wieland and of Goethe.

Among these encounters of Goethe's with his chivalrous

foe, no international comedy is more attractive and suggestive than his meeting with Napoleon at the Congress at Erfurt, quiet Erfurt which he had known when "everything there was so small, so narrow, so gentle and calm. The history of the world, especially of Germany, was then dawdling along in worn-out slippers." I love to read all the accounts of how, in the midst of the crush of European affairs at the Erfurt Congress, the presence of four kings, thirty-four princes, the Czar of all the Russias, and innumerable generals, innumerable Dukes and ministers, as well as miserable, groveling earls, Napoleon insisted on arranging an appointment for Goethe, and said with admiration as he came into his presence, "*Voilà un homme!*"; how he told him he had read Werther seven times (!); objected to a portion of it as "unnatural" (!!); begged Goethe to visit him in Paris—"You come to Paris. I demand it of you, by all means. There you will have a broader view of the world";—and how the master of the globe passed some exceedingly acute criticism on Voltaire's *Mort de Cæsar*, including a lively suggestion to Goethe which we have lived to see delightfully realized by Bernard Shaw in *Cæsar and Cleopatra*. "You ought to write a death of Cæsar," he said to Goethe, "but in a grander style than Voltaire. The world should be shown how Caesar would have made it happy, if he had been given time to realize his high-minded plans."

Vain as Goethe was, and egoistic, it is only the sort of penetration that irritates by piercing the superficial skin without probing to the life-blood of human reality that finds in Goethe's revulsion from Prussia, in his enjoyment of Napoleon, mere pleased vanity and egoism. There is, one may believe, something far deeper than that in his expressed happiness in Napoleon's understanding of his work, his profound nervous concern over the domination of a Prussian world that could "hoard and feed and sleep and know not me." Here is a quick instinct for the extension of free and flexible expression, as against the small, local, standardized rule of ideas which he seems to have felt was typified by Prussia—an instinct which must seem just and prophetic to all believers in an earth for many men of many minds.

Five years later, when the Prussian uprising was virtually certain of success against the French rule of the German kingdoms and duchys, Goethe exclaimed to a friend: "What has been gained? They say 'liberty'; but perhaps we should

call it 'liberation'—namely, liberation from one foreign yoke, not from the yoke of foreigners. It is true that I no longer see Frenchmen; but I see, instead, Cossacks, Magyars, brown and other Hussars."

Bielschowsky thinks it will surprise Prussians to know that Goethe could have looked upon "Prussian sovereignty as a foreign sovereignty." But it will not seem strange to the many American readers for whom *Wahrheit und Dichtung*, Mignon's Song, "*Über allen Gipfeln*," and many other creations of the greatest German, are the expression of a spirit and genius foreign to Prussia, alien from and all but inimical to the land of "Kruppism and Corporalism."

In that truth and poetry of Goethe's nature which he expressed in his long career as State Councillor at Weimar both before and after the French occupation, still more than in the truth and poetry he expressed as a man of letters, he exhibits the antithesis of Prussian ideals of executive power. For Goethe, in his life as a responsible administrator, the manners—and may we say the methods?—for establishing creative works of the State are the democratic ways of a common understanding and varied sympathy, the ways of the charm and dignity of the level glance of companionship.

In an interesting characterization of Goethe's executive career, Mr. H. W. Nevins said some years ago, in a Goethe Society address:

His spirit seemed inexhaustible. No labor, no adventure, not even drudgery, came amiss. We find him directing the mines at Ilmenau, relieving the destitute weavers of Apolda, converting the barbaric University of Jena into the true house of German thought, prescribing for the cattle-plague, choosing recruits for the little army, repairing roads, travelling with unwearied rapidity up and down the State, riding out night after night to the scene of some distant conflagration among the wooden cottages of the peasants. And it was all done without a trace of philosophic unction, but simply with that high stoicism which we have been told is characteristic of a naturally aristocratic mind. Patience and long endurance among the complexities and compromises of actual life gave him a close sympathy with all classes, and an intimate knowledge of the poor.

Mr. Nevins cannot resist the opportunity for a dig at Democrats by adding, "such as the eager democrat, though much occupied with discussing schemes for their amelioration, is often too busy or too fastidious to obtain."

Well—we all know that democracy's performance is far behind her promise. Plentiful are her hypocrisies. Plentiful,

too, her failures. But yet I think few persons will be found to deny that Goethe's "sympathy with all classes" belongs to democratic and Western, rather than to Prussian and Eastern, ideals, the obstructions and inhibitions of caste. The manners and methods of petty tyranny, of the insolence of office, the servile system and absolutism of Prussian rule in securing public efficiency, are at the opposite pole from the manners and methods of Goethe's record and career as a public worker while Councillor of Weimar. "My imaginative power," he tells us, "derives unspeakable benefit from sole companionship with men who are engaged upon some distinct, simple, enduring, and important labor"; and again: "Work makes the comrade."

Other views of Goethe's life as a Councillor are not wanting, it is true. One cannot help remembering the words of a far braver German opposer of Prussian standards, a far keener German sympathizer with the ideas of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, than Goethe. Listen to Heine in 1830, when Godwin was fawning on the conservative powers in a petty State office, when Hazlitt was dying seared with the vitriolic quarrels of his contemporaries, when Shelley had been nearly a decade in his grave, when Walt Whitman, a boy of eleven, was growing up in Paumonok to say, "I have claimed nothing to myself which I have not carefully claimed for others on the same terms," and Lincoln was driving the team of his father's oxen westward from Indiana to Illinois. Heine says:

The wind of the Revolution blew about the candles a little in the dark night of Germany, so that the red curtains of a German throne or two caught fire; but the old watchmen who do the policing of the German kingdom are already bringing out the fire engines, and will keep the candles closer snuffed for the future. Poor, fast-bound German people, lose not all heart in thy bonds! The fashionable coating of ice melts off from my heart, my soul quivers, and my eyes burn, and that is a disadvantageous state of things for a writer, who should control his subject-matter and keep himself beautifully objective, as the artistic school would have us and as Goethe has done; he has come to be eighty years old doing this, and minister and in good condition:—Poor German people! That is thy greatest man!

The ramblers in the house of Goethe's fame will not, indeed, deny a certain petty and even mean streak of worldly caution in his glorious endowment. Reineke Fuchs was not absent from his own nature. He would never have sacrificed



for an idea as Heine and William Hazlitt sacrificed; he would never have been willing to encounter for long, as a soldier in the liberation-war of humanity, the hardship, the obscure fortune, the poverty, the human dislike borne by those two fiery skirmishers and contemporary fighters against the standardization of thought.

But in a totally different way, Goethe's value as a solvent of the conception of artificially and imperially controlled expression has an enormous power. "Goethe's profound, imperturbable naturalism is absolutely fatal to all routine thinking," says Matthew Arnold. It is because of the great German thinker's deep-seated passion for truth founded on clear and varied observation that he remains for us to-day an anti-Prussian.

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